

CHAPTER OVERVIEW

The purpose of this reference chapter is to assist staff in identifying, assessing, and intervening with families who confront issues relating to child abuse and domestic violence. Current research indicates that domestic violence and child abuse/neglect frequently exist together within a family. In a review of 200 substantiated child abuse reports, the Massachusetts Department of Social Services found that 30% of the case records documented adult domestic violence. This was prior to the Department requiring specific documentation of domestic violence. Domestic violence may also present a barrier to effective interventions with the family if the issue is not identified or addressed. A better understanding of the relationship between domestic violence and child abuse is necessary.

Operating Definition

Domestic violence is a pattern of assaultive and coercive behaviors, including physical, sexual, and psychological attacks, as well as economic coercion, that adults or adolescents use against their intimate partners where the perpetrator and victim are currently or have been previously dating, cohabiting, married, or divorced.

Guiding Principles

To give balance to the various conflicting values between child welfare and domestic violence advocates, as well as to recognize not only the Division's ongoing priority of child protection but also the state of the law, practice and policy must focus on the best interest of the child. The Division recognizes that it is in a child's best interest to live in a safe family and therefore it is the goal of the Division to preserve the child's family if at all possible while recognizing that the safety of the child is of primary concern. The Division's mandate by law remains the investigation and treatment of child abuse and neglect. Services should be tailored to the specific needs of the individual family with the best interest of the child. This position is the current state of the law and supported by agency history.

The preferred manner in which to protect children in most instances of domestic violence is to join with the abused adult or family if intact, in safety planning for each family member. This will facilitate in holding the perpetrator accountable for his/her violent behaviors.

Collaboration with domestic violence providers on the community level is imperative in providing the best and most comprehensive services to families.

Domestic Violence and Children

Children are often the unintended victims of domestic violence. They are faced with the threat of physical violence and/or the threat of witnessing violent events in their homes. Children may:

- Be injured during an incident of parental violence;
- Be traumatized by fear for their abused parent and their own helplessness in protecting them;
- Blame themselves for not preventing the violence or for causing it;
- Be abused or neglected themselves.

Current Research

- Children are at greater risk of physical harm in families with domestic violence. In a national survey of over 6,000 families, researchers found that 50% of the men who frequently assaulted their wives also frequently abused their children. Researchers also found that “the rate of child abuse by those (mothers) who have been beaten is at least double that of mothers whose husbands did not assault them.”
- A large number of the severe and fatal injuries to children occur in families when men batter women. In a 1993 study, the Oregon Department of Human Resources found domestic violence in 41% of the families experiencing critical injuries or deaths due to child abuse and neglect (Oregon Department of Human Resources, 1993). Of the 67 child fatalities analyzed in Massachusetts in 1992 by the Department of Social Services, 29 (43%) occurred in families where the mother identified herself as a victim of domestic violence (Massachusetts Department of Social Services, 1993).
- Children are harmed emotionally as well as physically and sexually by domestic violence perpetrators. Between 3.3 million (Carlson, 1984) and 10 million (Straus, 1991) children in the United States are at risk of witnessing woman abuse annually. Studies find that children who witness domestic violence exhibit more aggressive and antisocial, as well as, fearful and inhibited behaviors. These children also demonstrate lower social competence (Wolfe et al., 1986). Furthermore, child witnesses exhibit more anxiety, aggression, depression, and temperament problems (Christopherulos et al., 1987; Forsstrom-Cohn & Rosenbaum, 1985; Holden & Ritchie, 1991; Hughes, 1988; Westra & Martin, 1981).

Adult Indicators of Domestic Violence

- Evidence of physical injuries;
- Feelings of depression, anger, and emotional distress;
- Low self esteem and suicidal thoughts;
- Frequent medical problems;
- Violence in family of origin;

- Requests for financial assistance;
- Isolation from friends and family;
- Damaged property (holes in the wall, etc.);
- Victim minimizing abuse;
- Offenders accusations of infidelity;
- Abuse of family pets;
- Limitation of access to financial resources;
- Children overly protective of one parent;
- Reluctance of adults to be interviewed separately;
- One adult answers all of the questions.

Child Indicators of Domestic Violence

The impact of domestic violence on children may be demonstrated by behaviors similar to those exhibited by children who are physically abused.

- Child may blame self for the abuse;
- Child may identify with the offender by “acting out” aggressively toward the adult victim;
- Child may be depressed, confused, or exhibit animosity, anger, or sadness;
- Infants may be moody, restless, sleepless, or lack responsiveness;
- Regression, such as bed wetting or thumb sucking;
- School phobia - a manifestation of leaving the adult victim alone in the home;
- Guilt or the inability to establish trusting relationships;
- Child tries to hide the fact domestic violence is present in the home;
- Child may take on the “mothering” role;

- Child may demonstrate fear when the offender is around;
- Child may be withdrawn, apathetic, or feel insecure and powerless.

Understanding Barriers to Leaving

The dynamics in a battering relationship, along with the lack of support to the adult victims, make it very difficult for them to leave the relationship. Following are some of the barriers preventing victims from leaving their abusers. The barriers must be taken into consideration when developing case plans and/or safety plans with the family.

- Economic dependence;
- Desire to keep family intact;
- Fear of future abuse;
- Lack of perceived alternatives;
- Lack of knowledge and access to services;
- Social expectations;
- Religious beliefs;
- Parenting responsibilities;
- Denial of abuse;
- Perceived responsibility or guilt for abuse;
- Shame or humiliation;
- Disability;
- Elderly;
- Language (primary mode of communication is a foreign language);
- Isolation from family and friends;
- Hopefulness/Optimism about the relationship getting better.

Identification and Assessment of Domestic Violence

Identification and assessment are both essential ingredients of an effective response to domestic violence. Identification procedures should include routine, direct inquiry with families regarding whether they have been hurt by their partner, along with continual observation for possible indicators of domestic violence. The identification and assessment process should be ongoing during all phases of working with the family as violence can begin at any point. When domestic violence is identified, staff should offer referrals for shelter services, legal services, counseling, etc.

Additional Considerations in Conducting Assessments

It is important to identify the influence of a family's culture as it pertains to domestic violence. If you are unaware of the values of a certain culture, consult your supervisor or local community provider for assistance. Issues regarding family roles, male dominance, and other beliefs must be understood in order to do an accurate assessment and provide effective intervention.

Related Subject: Chapter 23, of this section, Working With Culturally Diverse Families.

Depression is symptomatic of trauma and may not subside until safety is achieved. In order to promote a sense of empowerment and competence for the adult victim of domestic violence, his/her input is important in safety and service planning.

Persons who have experienced chronic abuse may need greater assistance in accessing resources and strong reinforcement for positive service outcomes. Examine closely the history of abuse the victim may have experienced and patterns of relationships that the person has had. The presence of natural support systems is also vital for successful outcomes.

Often it is difficult to decipher who is the primary initiator of the violence within the adult relationship. To assess self-defense and other responses to violence accurately, examine who holds the control in the relationship, who has been injured, who is afraid, and who has access to resources. Court records, police reports, and other documentation may assist in providing critical information.

Substance abuse should also be taken into consideration while conducting assessments. Substance abuse may increase the problem, but does not cause domestic violence. It is important to examine what role substance abuse plays with each family member. Does the perpetrator become more violent when under the influence? Does the adult victim's use of substances impede his/her ability to provide safety? Confronting the offender or adult victim while they are under the influence of substances may increase risk of harm to the worker or other family members and is discouraged.

Interventions

The worker's interactions and interventions with the family should attempt to meet three goals of successful intervention in domestic violence cases. These goals are:

1. To protect the child;
2. To assist abused parents referred to the agency for child abuse and neglect in protecting themselves and their child by providing services that are non-coercive and supportive; and
3. To document in the case record the violent behaviors of the domestic violence offender that places the child and adult victim at continued risk of harm.

The optimal intervention would meet all three goals. However, when no intervention exists that will meet all three goals simultaneously, the child's safety is of most importance. The other goals may be revisited once the safety of the child is assured.

When the results of an investigation or assessment indicate that child abuse and/or neglect is not present, involvement with the family is often terminated. However, in instances where domestic violence has been identified, information regarding community resources can be shared with the family if they are interested. This may be an important step in order to reduce the risk of the escalation of violence, which will reduce future risk to the child and the adult victim. Examples of services that play a crucial role include:

- Emergency shelter and longer-term transitional housing programs for victims and their children;
- Legal assistance and advocacy for victims of domestic violence;
- Law enforcement or prosecution based domestic violence programs;
- Programs that will teach perpetrators how to have non-violent relationships and how violence impacts their children;
- Programs that help victims and their children recover from violent relationships; and
- Programs that work with children who have witnessed domestic violence in their homes.

Interventions with families can be strengthened through collaboration with other service providers in the community. Collaborative relationships with service providers could include working out referral procedures that allow for adequate follow-up by Children's Division staff. Sharing of information with service providers will better enable them to help meet the needs of the adult victim and their children.

Service Planning

Service plans are important tools that staff use in providing structure for the process of working with families. Domestic violence is one more issue of importance to address when developing these plans with families. Service plans can incorporate measures that will provide for the safety of the adult victim and child and place responsibility upon the domestic violence offender for stopping the violent behaviors that jeopardize the safety of the family. Following are some suggested strategies to use in developing service plans:

- Documentation in the case record of each violent episode and the effect it has had on each family member;
- Work with the courts to increase safety by removing the domestic violence offender from the home when necessary, rather than the child, if the child and adult victim can be reasonably assured of safety in the home;
- Refer allegations of domestic violence to the prosecutor's office, if adult victim is agreeable;
- Encourage the domestic violence perpetrator to attend a treatment program for abusers and monitor any progress that has been made in becoming nonviolent; and
- Refer adult victim and child to domestic violence service providers in the community.

It is important to note that programs offered by domestic violence service providers are voluntary. Domestic violence service providers do not force or require victims to attend any of their programs. If the adult victim does not want to pursue any of the above options, it is counter-productive to attempt to force cooperation. Most often the adult victim and children are in the greatest danger and he/she is trying to protect the family by remaining silent. Outside intervention may increase the risk.

Safety Planning

Safety planning is an important step in assuring the safety of the child and adult victim. Safety plans can include all of the family members. These plans can be used to indicate what each family member including the perpetrator must do to make the entire family safe from future harm. Following are questions that can guide the safety plans that are developed with the family.

- In what ways can others and I help you?
- What do you feel you need to be safe?

- What particular concerns do you have about your children's safety?
- What have you tried in the past to protect yourself and your children (i.e., left for a few days, sought help from family or friends, fought back, got an order of protection)? Did any of these strategies help? Will any of them help you now?

If the adult victim has had the perpetrator evicted or is now living alone, evaluate the following options:

- Changing locks on doors and windows;
- Installing a better security system - window bars, locks, better lighting, and smoke detectors;
- Teaching the children to call the police or family and friends if they are snatched;
- Talking to schools and child-care providers about who has permission to pick up the children and developing other special provisions to protect the children;
- Finding an attorney knowledgeable about family violence to explore custody, visitation, and divorce provisions that protect the children and victim. Attain attorney referrals from local shelter and/or domestic violence coalition;
- In rural areas where only the mailbox may be visible from the street, covering the box with bright colored paper so the police can more easily locate the home;
- Obtaining an order of protection.

If the adult victim is leaving the perpetrator, review the following:

- When is the safest time to leave? Is transportation and money available? Do you have a safe place to go?
- Do you feel comfortable calling the police?
- Who will you tell and not tell about leaving?
- What can you and others do to prevent the abuser from finding you?
- Who in your support network do you trust to protect you?
- How will you travel safely to and from work or school to pick up the children?

- What community/legal resources will help you feel safer? Write down these addresses and phone numbers.
- Do you know the number of the local shelter?
- What custody provisions would keep you and the children safe?
- Would an order of protection be a viable option? Provide him/her with the information regarding how to obtain one.

If the adult victim is staying with the perpetrator review the following:

- In an emergency, what will work best to keep you and the children safe?
- Who can you call in a crisis situation?
- Would you call the police if the violence begins again? Is there a phone in the house or is there a signal that can be worked out with the children or the neighbors to call the police or get other help?
- If you need to flee temporarily, where can you go? Write down the addresses and phone numbers of these places.
- Identify dangerous locations in the house, such as basement or room without windows, and advise him/her not to get trapped in them.
- Are there any weapons in the house? Explore ways to make them the least dangerous (i.e., make sure not loaded, hidden away).
- Advise him/her to make an extra set of car keys and to keep some money stored away in case of an emergency.

Advise the adult victim to have the following available in case an emergency exists:

- Birth certificates
- Social Security cards
- Marriage certificates, driver's license, and car title
- Bank account numbers, credit and ATM cards, savings books
- Lease/rental agreements, house deed, mortgage papers
- Insurance information

- School and health records
- Welfare and Immigration documents
- Medications and prescriptions
- Divorce papers and other court documents
- Phone numbers and addresses for family, friends, and community agencies
- Clothing and comfort items for self and children
- Family photos or other significant mementos
- Children's favorite books, toys, etc.
- Keys

Suggestions for Interview Questions

Child Interviews

These questions should be used only if staff have determined through the assessment process that the child is aware of the domestic violence. Interviews with the child should focus on their account of what they have witnessed, the impact of witnessing the violence, and their perception or worries about safety.

- What kinds of things do Mom and Dad (boyfriend, etc.) fight about?
- What happens when they fight?
- Do they yell at or hit one another?
- What do you do when this is going on?
- What do you think about when this is happening?
- Do you ever get hurt when Mom and Dad are fighting?
- Do you think about your parents fighting a lot?
- Do these thoughts ever come to you at school or while playing?
- Do you have trouble sleeping at night? Do you have nightmares?

- Why do you think Mom and Dad fight?
 - What would you like them to do to make it better?
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- What do you do when Mom and Dad are fighting?

___ Stay in the Room	___ Go to a Sibling
___ Leave or Hide	___ Ask Parents to Stop
___ Phone Someone	___ Other
___ Go for Help	

- When Mom and Dad are fighting, what do you worry about the most?
- Have you talked to any grown-ups about this problem?
- In an emergency, whom would you call?

Adult Interviews

When staff have assessed the situation and concluded that domestic violence is present, it is recommended interviews with the adults are done separately. Interviewing the abused adult alone may be difficult, if not impossible. Creativity is often necessary in arranging these interviews. However, being unable to talk to the adult victim alone may be a signal of danger and related to the level of control the perpetrator has over the family. Following are some suggested questions to use in the interview to further assess danger to the adult victim and the children:

- Tell me about your relationship?
- How do decisions get made in your family?
- Do you feel free to do and believe what you want?
- Does your partner ever feel/act jealous?
- Have you ever felt afraid of your partner; if so, why?
- Has your partner ever used physical force on you?
- Have you ever been afraid for the safety of your children?

- How are you able to keep your children safe?

Has your partner:

- Prevented you from going to work, school, or church?
- Prevented you from seeing friends or family?
- Listened in on your phone calls or violated your privacy?
- Followed you?
- Accused you of being unfaithful?
- Controlled your money?
- Called you degrading names?
- Humiliated you in public or at home?
- Destroyed your possessions?
- Threatened to hurt you, the children, or other family members?
- Threatened to kill you?
- Forced you to perform sexual acts against your will?

These questions will help you to further assess the level of risk to the children:

Has your partner:

- Called your child degrading names?
- Threatened to take the children from your care?
- Accused you of being an unfit parent?
- Threatened to hurt or kill you in front of the children?
- Hurt you in front of the children?
- Hit your children?
- Touched your children in a way that made you or them feel uncomfortable?

- Asked your children to report on what you do during the day?

Has your child:

- Overheard the yelling and/or violence?
- Behaved in ways that remind you of your partner?
- Physically hurt you or other family members?
- Tried to protect you?
- Tried to stop the violence?
- Hurt him/herself?
- Hurt family pets?
- Been fearful of leaving you?
- Exhibited emotional/behavioral problems at home or school?

Offender Interviews

Assessing the dangerousness of the offender is important in order to protect yourself and to lessen the risk for children and the adult victim. If you feel that the offender is too dangerous, close the interview and consult with a supervisor regarding what steps to take next. Following are some questions that may be used in the assessment of the offender:

- Tell me about your relationship.
- What things do you like about your partner and family?
- How does your family handle conflict?
- What kinds of things do you expect from your partner/family?
- What do you do when you do not get your own way?
- Have you ever been so angry that you physically hurt someone?
- Have you ever been told that violence is a problem for you? By whom?

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The questions provided are a guide for staff to use in assessing the danger posed to children and adult victims in households where domestic violence is present.

MEMORANDA HISTORY: